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# From Papyri to King James: The Christmas Story Seen Through the Evolution of the English Bible

Tanner, Wesley B.; Beam, Kathryn L.

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*The Christmas Story  
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## INTRODUCTION

THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LIBRARY is privileged to count within its collections a number of distinguished documents marking significant milestones in the history of the biblical text. These documents, spread across nations, peoples, and languages, trace the development of the Bible from ancient Egyptian manuscripts to the modern, printed book.

The English-language Bible came late in the long history of the preservation and transmission of the biblical text. The Wycliffe English Bibles, the earliest complete biblical manuscripts in English, appeared in the late 1380s and 1390s, or less than a century before the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century. However, the roots of these translations are long and venerable, extending back some twelve centuries to the earliest New Testament documents and even further back to oral tradition and pre-history for the Old Testament.

This exhibit traces the roots of the King James Bible, showing both its direct ancestors and other, related religious works from A.D. 150 to A.D. 1611. Attention is also given to the materials upon which the biblical text was preserved, from papyrus to parchment to paper.

As this exhibit opens during the Christmas holiday season, portions of the Bible relating to the Nativity are shown in several instances. New Testament texts are open to Luke's narrative of the Christmas story while the wall cases display facsimiles of the beginning of Luke from the Gutenberg Bible as well as works by Albrecht Dürer and illustrations from richly illuminated manuscripts.

This exhibit is a revised version of an earlier exhibition, "Highlights in the Transmission of the English Bible: The Christmas Story," prepared by Helen S. Butz.

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Designed by Wesley B. Tanner, Ann Arbor

Cover illustration:  
Beginning of the Gospel of Luke from the Bishops' Bible, London, 1574,  
scanned by the Michigan Papyri Digitization Project

#### CASE I

*The vast majority of the earliest biblical and related manuscripts were written in ink on papyrus, which is a writing surface made from strips of a water plant found in the Nile region of Egypt. Many papyri from ancient times in Egypt have survived in excellent condition because of the dry climate. The University of Michigan has the largest collection of papyrus manuscripts in the Western hemisphere.*

##### *P. Mich. Inv. 106. Census Declaration. A.D. 119*

While not a biblical document, this census fragment attests to the practice of census taking very early in recorded history and thus serves to support aspects of the nativity narrative in the Gospel of Luke. The house-by-house census was required every 14 years, and the declaration shown here was prepared for the census in the year 118, at the village of Bacchias.

*Horos, son of Horos and Herieus, grandson of Horos, declares himself,  
a cultivator of state-land, 48 years old, with a scar on his left eyebrow;  
Tapekusi, his wife, 45 years old;  
Horos, their son [age lost] with no identifying marks;  
Horion, another son, 1 year old, with no mark;  
Horion, his brother, age 35, with a scar in the middle of his forehead;  
Thenatumis, wife of his brother, age 31, no mark;  
Horos, their son, 1 year old, with no mark.*

The nomographos (notary) of Bacchias states that he wrote the above; three additional officials then signed it.

##### *P. Mich. Inv. 6238. Epistles of Paul. Circa A.D. 200*

Two leaves from a papyrus codex of the Letters of Saint Paul, dating from about A.D. 200. The codex, generally referred to as "P 46," is thought originally to have contained 104 leaves. There are now 86 leaves extant: 30 are at the University of Michigan and 56 are in the Chester Beatty Collection in Dublin, Ireland.

The discovery of this codex in 1931 provided a text at least a century older than the Vatican and Sinaitic codices, the oldest authorities on which the text had previously rested.

Displayed on the left is one leaf of the second letter to the Corinthians; on the right are the opening paragraphs of the Epistle to the Hebrews, preceded by the last line of the Letter to the Romans.

##### *P. Mich. Inv. 5554. Fragments of Deuteronomy. Circa A.D. 150*

Fragments of a papyrus manuscript in codex format; originally comprised the Septuagint version (that is, a Greek translation from the Hebrew) of Numbers and Deuteronomy. Portions of 50 other leaves from the same codex are in the Chester Beatty Collection in Dublin, Ireland.

Written in a fine calligraphic hand, the manuscript was probably produced for a Christian community. This may be deduced from the fact that the fragment is from a codex, that is, there is writing on both sides of the leaf. A scroll, the format most often used by Jewish scribes, is usually found with writing only on one side.

##### *P. Mich. Inv. 4171. Tax Roll. A.D. 173/174*

Portions of a tax record from Karanis, Egypt, showing accounts of the money collected from day to day for various kinds of taxes, chiefly poll tax, vineyard, and garden taxes.

In the receipts for such taxes as these, it is interesting to remark the occasional use of the Greek verb, *tetelestai*, meaning "it has been paid." This is the same word used by John in the crucifixion narrative. The familiar English rendering is the phrase "it is finished."

Originally in the form of a roll over 171 columns in length, this document has been cut into two-column sections to facilitate preservation and use.

*P. Mich. Inv. 263. Libellus. A.D. 250*

A certificate issued during the Decian persecution to a woman and her daughter from the village of Theadelphia in Egypt. It testifies that they had obeyed the imperial edict to participate in pagan sacrifices as proof of their loyalty to the government. Since faithful Christians would not sacrifice to pagan gods, the edict served as a means for identifying Christians and making them liable for punishment or imprisonment. The official who signed this wrote his name boldly: Hermas.

*P. Mich. Inv. 1570. Matthew 26:19-52. 3d/4th century*

Written in a somewhat unskilled hand, this fragment is interesting for the copy error and correction found in line 12. Although it was possible to “erase” a mistake on papyrus by washing it out, in this case the scribe simply crossed out the error and wrote in the correction.

The fragment is also important textually in that it contains an account of the Lord’s Supper and the Betrayal and because of the evidence it gives of the presence of the Western text in Egypt at an early date.

CASE 2

*Towards the eighth and ninth centuries the use of papyrus for manuscripts began to decline. Instead, documents and books were written on parchment, or vellum, which is a skin (generally kid or calf) that has been soaked, dried, scraped, and rubbed until thin and smooth.*

*Mich. Ms. 1. Vulgate Bible. 13th Century*

This translation of the Bible into Latin by Jerome (Circa 342-420) was the standard scriptural text in Western Christendom for a millennium, and for much longer in the Roman Catholic faith. The term ‘vulgate’ derives from Latin and means the “common” version.

The manuscript Bible is open to the portrait of St. Paul that illuminates the initial which begins the text of I Corinthians. This manuscript was written in France or northern Italy. Such illuminations as this involve the decoration of a manuscript with gold or silver as well as paint, the result being a combination of ornament and illustration. Illuminated initials begin each book of this Bible; five have portraits. The reader will note the pervasive use of a system of abbreviations which scribes developed to save time and parchment.

*Mich. Ms. 8. Service Book. Circa 14th century*

A church Service book in Greek, written about the fourteenth century, in ink on parchment; it includes readings from the Old and New Testaments. The manuscript is of particular interest for its eight palimpsest – that is, “recycled” – leaves, one of which is shown. At the bottom of the right-hand page can be seen the faint remains of writing that have been scraped off so that the vellum could be reused. This was a common practice, as vellum was quite costly. Scholars have determined that the original writing, in Greek uncials, which contains parts of the New Testament epistles, dates from about the seventh century.

*Mich. Ms. 22. Gospel Book. 11th-12th century*

A manuscript on vellum containing the four Gospels in Greek; a Byzantine monastic product from the eleventh or twelfth century. The writing is minuscule and, in contrast to the Service book displayed to the left, the words are separated. The colorful miniatures, in a somewhat flat style, reflect their Byzantine origins. A miniature depicting the Evangelist Luke is shown.

*Mich. Ms. 141. Armenian New Testament. A.D. 1161*

The four Gospels in Armenian; written in the town of Edessa by the scribe Vasil, for two patrons, Christopher and his wife, Aygots.

This manuscript is illuminated with colorful headpieces, initials, and marginal decorations, and with two full-page portraits. The portrait shown depicts Saint Luke.

Armenian translations of the Bible were among the earliest, stemming from the fifth century, and are considered to be exceptionally accurate. They sometimes are called the “Queen of the Translations.”

### CASE 3

*Towards the close of the Middle Ages the use of parchment for manuscripts slowly gave way to paper. But the truly significant revolution took place in the mid-fifteenth century with the invention of moveable type for the production of books and documents. The impact of the printed book on education, science, politics, commerce, international relations – virtually every phase of civilization – is beyond calculation.*

#### *Wycliffe Bible. 1388*

A facsimile of the first translation of the New Testament in English. This landmark in the history of the English Bible and of the English language, together with a translation of the Old Testament made during the same period, is frequently referred to as the Wycliffe Bible. Biblical scholars, however, consider it doubtful that this translation from the Vulgate is the actual work of John Wycliffe alone, although his inspiration for the work is uncontested.

Wycliffe, a Yorkshireman, was a major intellectual figure during the latter part of the 14th century. Theologian, philosopher, and reformer, his influence on the thinking of such churchmen as Hus and Luther was so significant that Wycliffe came to be called the Morningstar of the Reformation.

#### *Gutenberg, or 42-Line Bible. Mainz, before 1456*

An original leaf (paper) from the 42-Line Bible printed in Mainz

before 1456. This is commonly referred to as the Gutenberg Bible and is the first book in a Western European language to have been printed using moveable type.

About 200 copies were printed; 45 complete or substantially complete copies still exist. The intent to carry on the visual characteristics of a manuscript is evident in the spaces left for decorative initials as well as in the hand rubrication. Note that while there are chapter headings, there are no verse marks.

The page displayed shows the end of Chapter 57 and the beginning of Chapter 58 of the Book of Isaiah. The text is the Latin Vulgate, the standard text since Jerome's completion of his translation in A.D. 405.

#### *First printed Greek New Testament. Basel, J. Froben, 1516*

Erasmus was commissioned to prepare the Greek text for publication by the renowned Basel printer, Johann Froben, who held exclusive rights granted by the Pope to issue a Greek New Testament. The work was undertaken rather hurriedly and based on only six Greek manuscripts, dating from the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. The Latin text, printed parallel with the Greek, is Erasmus's own translation. This version ultimately became the foundation of the New Testament “textus receptus,” the basis for the King James Version a century later.

#### *Tyndale New Testament. Antwerp, 1536*

The first printed edition of the New Testament in English was the translation by William Tyndale, probably printed by Peter Schoeffer, the Younger, at Worms, in 1525 or 1526. Only one complete copy of that first printing still exists, for the translation had been officially condemned by the English bishops, and all copies that could be found were burned. Tyndale himself was condemned for heresy and burned at the stake in 1536, the year in which the edition shown here was printed.

Tyndale's translation was influenced by a number of the earlier versions of the New Testament including the Vulgate, Luther's German translation, and Erasmus's translation (3d edition) as well as earlier Greek and Hebrew texts. The result of Tyndale's labors was a particularly felicitous English translation which more heavily influenced the King James Version than all the others combined.

#### CASE 4

##### *Coverdale Bible. Zurich?, 1535*

A leaf from the editio princeps (that is the first printed edition) of the complete Bible in English, translated and edited by Miles Coverdale, a Yorkshireman. It was probably printed in Zurich. Coverdale leaned heavily on Tyndale's translation, Luther's German version, a Swiss-German text by Zwingli and Leo Juda, and the Latin version of Sanctes Pagninus rather than the Greek and Hebrew originals.

Coverdale's version included the Apocrypha (the books between the Testaments) from which a page of the Book of Esdras is shown.

##### *Estienne New Testament. Geneva, 1551*

An edition of Erasmus's Greek and Latin New Testament together with the Vulgate. This printing by Robert Estienne (or Stephanus) is notable for the fact that in it the chapters were for the first time divided into verses (a total of 7,959). Chapter divisions had been introduced somewhat earlier, reputedly by Stephen Langton in the thirteenth century.

##### *Geneva Bible. Geneva, R. Hall, 1560*

Issued in a smaller, more convenient format than its predecessors, the Geneva Bible was produced by Protestant refugees in Switzerland, after having fled the Roman Catholic persecution in England under Queen Mary. This was the first English Bible to use verse

divisions and the first to be printed in Roman type. It is sometimes also called the "Breeches Bible," because of the translation of Genesis 3:7: "they [Adam and Eve] knewe that they were naked, and they sewed fig tre leaues together, and made them selues breeches."

##### *Douay Bible. Rheims, 1582; Douai, 1606-1610*

The first edition of the Roman Catholic version of the New Testament in English. It was translated from the Vulgate, and printed at Rheims in 1582 under the auspices of English Catholic refugees from the rule of the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. This translation exerted considerable influence on the King James Version in terms of vocabulary and distinctive phrases and expressions.

The Old Testament portion was issued 1606-1610, after the English College had moved from Rheims to Douai. The entire enterprise is generally referred to as the Douay Bible.

#### CASE 5

##### *Kralitz Bible. Czechoslovakia, 1579-1593*

The followers of Jan Hus, the Bohemian Brethren, while under heavy persecution by the Roman Catholic Church, produced a Czech Bible under clandestine conditions. It was printed in Kralitz at the castle of Baron John von Zerotin, near Willimowitz in Moravia. The translation was made by a group of eight scholars, whose text and commentaries were to become a standard for study of both the Bible and the Bohemian language until modern times. Once printed, the Bible was zealously suppressed by the Jesuits, hence its extreme rarity today.

##### *The Great Bible. London, E. Whitchurch, 1541*

First published in 1539, the Great Bible is a revision by Coverdale of Matthew's Bible (1537), corrected with the aid of Sebastian Münster's Latin translation of the Old Testament, Erasmus's ver-



sion of the New Testament, the Vulgate, and other sources. Coverdale worked under the patronage of Thomas Cromwell; thus the version is sometimes called "Cromwell's Bible." It is also known as "Cranmer's Version," because of the addition of a prologue by Thomas Cranmer for the 1540 edition.

On display is the sixth issue of the Great Bible, the fifth with Cranmer's prologue. It was printed by Edward Whitchurch who, eight years later, also printed one of the issues of the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer.

*The Bishops' Bible. London, R. Jugge, 1574*

First published in 1568 by R. Jugge, the Bishops' Bible is a revised version of the Great Bible, produced by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, with the assistance of many bishops and biblical scholars. This revision was undertaken in reaction to the Geneva Bible, but never achieved its popularity or influence.

CASE 6

*King James Bible. London, R. Barker, 1611*

Sometimes also called the Authorized Version, this was, for 350 years, the standard version wherever the English language was spoken. The translation was enthusiastically supported by James I of England. It is a revision of the Bishops' Bible, taking into account the versions by Tyndale, Matthew, and Coverdale as well as the Great and Geneva Bibles. There were two issues in 1611, sometimes distinguished as the "He" or "She" Bible. The copy exhibited is the "She" (corrected) version in which Ruth 3:15 reads: "... and she went into the city."

*Miniature Chained Bible & Lectern*

Bibles were so rare in olden times, it was necessary to chain them to lecterns and other places. The chaining of single books in churches doubtless originated in the injunctions given by Edward VI to

"the Clergy and the Laetie" in 1547 and printed by Grafton in which they are ordered "to provide within three moneths next after the visitacion one boke of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English, and within one twelve moneth after the saied visitacion the Paraphrasis of Erasmus the same to be sette uppe in some convenient place within the churche."

This injunction was repeated by Queen Elisabeth in 1559, and although nothing was mentioned about chains, it seems very probable that the Churchwardens, would for their own sake adopt that plan of protecting their property. (Blades. *Books in Chains*.)

CASE 7

*The Bible Collection continues to grow with the additions of significant editions, in manuscript and in print, and in a wide variety of languages. Some of the more recent acquisitions are displayed here.*

*Chinese Bible. Scampore, Bengal, India, 1815-1822*

First edition of the Bible in Chinese and a landmark in the history of printing, being both the first complete Bible in this language, and, simultaneously, the first book in Chinese to be printed from moveable metal type. In the original paper wrappers, sewn and tied at the inner margin in the tradition of Chinese binding, with original silk-covered case. One of only four copies located in the United States. This is an extraordinary addition to the Library's already excellent collection of early and important Bibles.

*Karen (Sgaw) Bible. Tavoy [Burma]: Karen Mission Press, 1843*

The Library's most recent biblical acquisition is this copy of the first edition of the New Testament in Karen, a language used by the indigenous people of eastern and southern Burma. Sgaw was spoken by the most numerous Karen tribe in the provinces of Pegu and Tenasserim.

The work of translation was begun by Jonathan Wade, the first missionary sent to this area by the American Baptist Missionary Union. It was completed by Francis Mason. An edition of 2,000 copies was brought out in 1843, with the text printed in modified Burmese characters.

This copy was given to the Library in 1992 by Elizabeth S. Bishop. It had belonged to her great-great-grandmother, Stella Kneeland Bennett, who, with her husband, had been a missionary in Burma from 1829 until her death in 1891.

*Mich. Ms. 248. Ethiopic Psalter. 17th-18th century.*

The latest addition to the Library's collection of Ethiopic manuscripts is this Psalter given by Michael Courlander in 1989. It is particularly interesting in that its leather carrying case is still largely intact. The text is written on vellum in a single column, with rubricated accents and passages and a binding of leather over wooden boards.

*Amharic Bible. Ethiopia, 1961*

In 1961, this copy of the revised Amharic edition was presented to the University of Michigan by Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia. It was printed in Addis Ababa by the Berhanena Selam Printing Press, a branch of the Haile Selassie I Foundation.

Shown here is the presentation page with the autograph of Haile Selassie I in Amharic.

WALL CASE 1

*Facsimiles of works by Albrecht Dürer, from the Publications of the Dürer Society, London, 1898-1911.*

*The Virgin Seated by a Wall. Engraving, 1514.*

*The Virgin with the Child in Swaddling Clothes. Engraving, 1520.*

*The Virgin and Child, Seated. Pen and india ink on paper, circa 1500.*

*The Virgin and Child. Ink on paper, circa 1514.*

WALL CASE 2

*Books of Hours, or private prayerbooks for the laity, came into use about the eleventh century. Not subject to clerical control, these prayerbooks could be fashioned to meet individual and personal predilections. In particular, they could be decorated according to the taste and purse of the owner. Their popularity peaked at just that point in the evolution of the manuscript book when the French late-Gothic period was reaching its zenith. The result is that among these Books of Hours are found some of the most beautiful of all illuminated manuscripts.*

*Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry. 1413-1417*

Facsimile of a Book of Hours commissioned by Jean, Duke of Berry, with miniatures executed by the Limbourg brothers. Original in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

*The Visconti Hours. Before 1395*

Facsimile of a Book of Hours commissioned by Giangaleazzo Visconti. In two volumes, the illuminations of the first part were by Giovannino de' Grassi; the work was finished by Luchino Belbello after Grassi's death. Original in the Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence, Italy.

WALL CASE 3

*Gutenberg, or 42-Line Bible. Mainz, before 1456*

Facsimile of the prologue and the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke from the Gutenberg or 42-Line Bible; printed in Mainz, Germany. Original in the Gutenberg-Museum, Mainz, Germany.

WALL CASE 4

*Gebetbuch Karls des Kühnen, vel potius, Stundenbuch der Maria von Burgund. 15th century*

An illuminated Flemish Book of Hours from the second half of the fifteenth century. The miniatures are in part attributed to the renowned artist, Master of Mary of Burgundy. Original in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria.

*Reichenauer Evangelistar. 11th century*

A liturgical book containing the Gospel readings for the church year. Probably produced during the early eleventh century at the Benedictine Abbey on Reichenau, an island in Lake Constance, Germany. The original is in the Kupferstichkabinett of the Staatlichen Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Germany.

WALL CASE 5

*Facsimiles of works by Albrecht Dürer, from the Publications of the Dürer Society, London, 1898-1911.*

*The Adoration of the Magi. Woodcut, circa 1505-1511.*

*The Flight into Egypt. Woodcut, circa 1505-1511.*

WALL CASE 6

*Facsimiles of works by Albrecht Dürer, from the Publications of the Dürer Society, London, 1898-1911.*

*The Nativity. The Paumgartner Altarpiece, (center panel). Oil on panel, circa 1504.*

*The Adoration of the Magi. Oil on panel, 1504.*

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